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ABSTRACT

Presented in a question-and-answer format, this digest offers guidelines in choosing an enriching summer program for gifted students. The following questions are addressed: What are the possibilities? What needs do summer programs meet? Who should make the selection? What does the selection process involve? What variables are important? and What financial assistance is available? The summer program can allow students to experiment in specific areas of interest, to work with adult role models, and to sample college life. It is important that the students themselves be involved in the selection process. Program selection requires the identification of what the student wants and what programs are available in his/her areas of interest. Important variables to consider include: length, age range, program requirements, group size, individual attention, leadership, depth of staff experience, credit or noncredit courses, facilities and equipment, schedule, recreation, social activities, safety, and programs abroad. The availability of financial assistance for many programs is noted. Includes two references. (DB)

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DISCOVERING INTERESTS AND TALENTS THROUGH SUMMER EXPERIENCES

What are the possibilities?

Work side by side with a microbiologist 8 hours a day. Collaborate with playwrights and directors to produce a new play. Learn to fly a small plane. Be immersed in the world of music. Be a writer 12 hours a day, creating short stories, poems, essays, or a weekly newspaper. Study the ecosystems of coral reefs on daily dives in the Caribbean. Build a wooden sea kayak and paddle it along the Maine coast for 3 weeks. Learn to speak Arabic, Chinese, or Portuguese.

What needs do summer programs meet?

The majority of summer experiences are designed to provide a pressure-free, noncompetitive environment in which young people can explore their areas of particular interest in depth. They have an opportunity to work with adult role models who are enthusiastic about their field and give individual support to each participant. Gifted students find it validating to be among peers who share their own excitement and skill level. They form bonds based on common interests with youth from around the country and the world. Many programs, especially outdoor adventures, help young people develop teamwork skills. For children whose abilities exceed those of their age mates, ungraded programs based on interest and skill rather than age provide a supportive and stimulating environment.

Summer is a perfect time to experiment—a time for young people to test out their interest level in a topic. By immersing themselves full time for a month or two in painting, architecture, marine biology, or laboratory research, they gain a realistic introduction to the content, demands, and lifestyle of a career area they may be considering. Such an experience can be helpful in deciding whether they want to pursue a topic as a hobby or a main focus. Summer is also a time to try out an entirely new area that may not be available during the school year.

If students choose a program on a college campus, they also have a chance to adjust to college courses, scheduling out-of-class time, and dormitory life before the pressures of the freshman year begin. These programs also provide an excellent opportunity for students to test out their assumptions about campus sizes and locations: They can experience day-to-day life on a small rural campus or in a large urban location before committing themselves to full-time enrollment.

Who should make the selection?

Young people who are involved in every step of choosing a summer program have a more satisfying experience than youngsters who are placed in a program of their parents' or counselor's choice. Staff members and other participants can name the youngsters who show a lack of commitment to the program because it was someone else's idea.

The selection process itself can also provide a sense of accomplishment and closure for gifted students. In addition, researching and evaluating the possibilities and filling out the applications, some of which may require personal statements of interest, are excellent first steps toward the college selection and application process. Questions young people ask themselves in looking for summer programs are similar to questions they will ask in finding an appropriate college focus and atmosphere (Berger, 1989).

What does the selection process involve?

It is important to find a program that meets the total needs of a child—social and emotional as well as intellectual. Selecting a program is a two-step process. First young people need to think about what they want—about what is important to them as individuals. This involves thinking about the subject area or areas, the type of activities they enjoy, and the atmosphere in which they are most comfortable and most successful.

The second step involves learning as much as possible about a variety of programs. Young people can use the directories listed at the end of this digest and/or independent educational counselors to get a starting list of programs. It is useful to request brochures from five or more programs in the same field. Reading and comparing a significant number of brochures on the same topic reveals differences in the programs' emphases and philosophies as well as the activities they offer and the daily schedules.

Once a young person understands what is generally available in a field, it is time to find out specific information about individual programs. Two valuable sources are previous participants and the program director and staff. In talking with several previous participants, a child gains a realistic view of what involvement in the program will be like.

Directors of reputable programs welcome questions by prospective participants. They want the youngsters in their programs to have successful, happy experiences. They know that one of the best ways to ensure success is for youngsters to understand ahead of time just what is involved so they can pick a program that matches their goals.

What variables are important?

Within each subject area, different organizations set up their programs in different ways. For example, some camps and schools have rigid schedules that include a series of activity

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periods. Other organizations provide a flexible format in which participants may remain in an activity for an extended amount of time. Some academic programs require 2 hours of study every evening while others believe that scheduling one's time is part of the learning process. Neither program is right or wrong; each is suited to the learning patterns and lifestyles of different participants. The following are some of the many other factors that vary from program to program (Ware, 1990):

Length: Programs vary from 1 to 10 weeks. Length affects the skill level that can be reached and the overall cost.

Age Range: Determine the age range of participants and the way they are grouped to know whether a child will be with peers or will be one of the oldest or youngest members. In campus programs will the child study with undergraduates or peers?

Requirements: In some types of programs, especially in academics and music, the requirements for application can provide a clue to what one can expect. For example, a music program that requires a tape or audition may involve more difficult orchestral music than a program that takes anyone who has had 1 year of lessons.

Size: The overall number of participants, as well as the size of activity or study groups, affects the atmosphere of a program and the kinds of activities that are possible.

Individual Attention: Closely related to size is the ratio of leaders or teachers to participants. The lower the ratio, the more individual attention one can expect.

Leadership: There is not one ideal background for a leader or teacher. They include professionals, experienced volunteers, and teachers at all levels: college faculty, public and independent school teachers, and undergraduate teaching assistants. The common qualities that make them appropriate are experience in their field, experience and pleasure in working with young people, and the flexibility and desire to be in a summer program setting.

Depth of Experience: Ask the staff and previous participants for specific examples of the activities and the skill level they developed to judge whether the program is an appropriate match for the goals of the applicant.

Credit or Noncredit Courses: A program's approach to credit is an integral part of its philosophy. Programs that do not grant credit want to encourage students to pursue a topic at length without being concerned about grades. Credit-granting programs view grades as a normal part of an academic experience.

Facilities and Equipment: The quality of the facilities and the amount of equipment impact the level of involvement. One computer for every two participants allows more work time than one computer for five participants. This also applies to laboratory, art, drama, music, and sports equipment.

Schedule: Does the participant want to have every minute scheduled, or does he or she prefer a more relaxed pace that includes unscheduled free time?

Recreation: To what extent are athletics or other recreational activities such as arts or drama offered or required? Some organizations require an hour or two of individual or team sports daily. Others view activities as optional.

Social Activities: Most programs plan informal group activities for participants to get to know one another. A few programs leave this up to the students.

Safety: In all programs safety is of paramount importance. Ask about the training and qualifications of the instructors, the certifications or inspections the program has passed, and the provisions that are made for safety.

Programs Abroad: Travel abroad involves its own set of questions such as whether or not to include a homestay, study, or extensive travel and whether to travel with a group of Americans or be immersed as an individual in day-to-day life in a different country.

What financial assistance is available?

A surprisingly large number of summer programs offer financial aid. Many do what they can to make participation possible for a young person with potential who could not participate otherwise. Because some independent schools, camps, and adventure programs are committed to including participants from a wide range of backgrounds, they have scholarship funds available. College programs may offer scholarships based on need, merit, or a combination of the two. They often have special assistance to attract qualified minority students and women to programs in mathematics, science, and engineering. Some campuses select highly qualified students and waive tuition for coursework, charging only for room and board. The National Science Foundation makes available many grants that colleges use to waive all costs for a small number of students or to reduce fees for a larger group of participants.

Always ask programs not only what assistance is available but what the deadline and special requirements are for application. It is common to have the deadline for financial aid be a month earlier than the general admissions date.

Young people are encouraged to approach community organizations or businesses for scholarships to programs in related fields. For example, the League of Women Voters may support a workshop in leadership and government, or a local conservation organization may give assistance for travel to students doing volunteer work in a national park. There is also value in young people's investing their own money earned at part-time jobs or individual work projects.

References

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